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ABSTRACT

An important aspect of rethinking reading lists and anthologies is the realization that new arrangements require close reading to determine assumptions, biases, and concerns. Readers are challenged to acknowledge multiple points of view while reconstructing their own ideas of who belongs to a culture and what comprises its literature. Redefining the canon and expanding it internationally not only does justice to diverse voices too often ignored, but also trains students to identify the point of view of a particular piece of writing and, consequently, to develop an attitude of reflective thinking. Focusing upon point of view while deliberately selecting novels which reflect compromises with society (such as Carlos Fuentes' "The Good Conscience," F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart," Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," and Nadine Gordimer's "Six Feet of the Country") contributed to critical thinking in a course on modern fiction. The context of this reconstructed canon of modern fiction expanded students' understanding not only of different cultures, but also of familiar ones, and opened dialogue concerning the seductions of conformity and compromise. Students learned to clarify the distinction between reading a character as the text defines him, and as the reader might prefer; and learned not to assume a novel shares their biases. Examining these novels allowed the students to see various cultures through the eyes of both members and outsiders, and of both proponents and opponents of wealth, stoicism, compassion, tolerance, and confusion. (PRA)

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INSIGHTS INTO COMPROMISE THROUGH AN INTERNATIONAL CANON

The editors of the exciting new Heath Anthology of American Literature offer us a full range of voices previously unavailable for surveying American literature in a typical undergraduate classroom. More importantly, rather than merely patching in a few minority works, the writers have rewoven the entire pattern and refocused the introductions, revealing more accurately the variety of styles and concerns and conflicting perspectives expressed from America's discovery to the present time. Whereas the old canon of the survey anthology was selected to illustrate (and reestablish) traditional categories and viewpoints, this anthology challenges readers to acknowledge multiple points of view--to reconstruct their very ideas of who belongs to a culture and what comprises its literature. For teachers and students alike, an important aspect of rethinking reading lists is the way new arrangements require one to read closely to determine assumptions, biases, and concerns which the crossreferencing of contrasting works accentuates. Redefining the canon not only does justice to diverse voices too often ignored, but also trains students to identify the point of view of a particular piece of writing and, consequently, to develop an attitude of reflective thinking.

Engaging students in an analysis of the linguistic and stylistic features which determine a work's point of view is nothing new. However, reconsidering the canon encourages us to juxtapose texts which reflect different assumptions--which indeed question the validity of the labels we have used to characterize literary periods. Furthermore, the novels themselves may be used to explore ways the dominant culture persuades its members to conform and compromise. Focusing upon point of view while deliberately selecting novels which reflect in both familiar and foreign cultures the compromises with society these works acknowledge, elucidate, or even advocate contributed to critical thinking in a course in modern fiction I recently taught. The context of this reconstructed canon of modern fiction expanded our understanding not only of different cultures, but also of familiar ones, opening dialogue concerning compromise and seduction, most explicitly illustrated in Carlos Fuentes' The Good Conscience.

Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, and Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury reflect familiar American struggles with social values. Fitzgerald's first person narrator, as we all know, clings to his conservative, midwestern sensibility in the midst of the New York mess he finds himself in the fateful summer he turns forty. Yet, Nick Carraway's fascination with Fitzgerald's "beautiful and damned" creatures establishes a troubling reality: that a work can make attractive the very system it critiques. Thus, even after Gatsby's parties

are over, they linger in the mind as seductive images. As Nick abandons Jordan Baker and returns home to break conclusively a relationship he has cowardly prolonged from fear of confrontation, he is left with his unsettling infatuation with destructive Daisy; and memories of his New York summer linger vividly, overshadowing the promise of a reinstated midwest ethic. From a feminist perspective, both Daisy and "the green breast of the new world" are types of the edible woman, inviting consumption but attainable to Nick only on the voyeuristic level. Thus, although Nick only temporarily compromises his ethical standards, he fails to enlarge his ethical system and merely retreats to a system unworkable in the complex metropolis and now unconvincing in the midwest. The novel clarifies the seductive power of the roaring twenties and the compromises success and power invite.

Reading The Sun Also Rises invites us to distinguish between the implicit rhetoric of a work, and the reader's response. For many of us, Hemingway's value for stoicism and scorn for sensitivity contradict our feminist values. Thus, an analysis of The Sun Also Rises clarifies the distinction between reading a character as the text defines him, and as the reader might prefer. The students may debate whether one should feel scorn or sympathy for Robert Cohen, and whether Jake Barnes deserves our admiration. Students learn not to assume a novel shares their biases--especially when rhetoric is implicit rather than

explicit. By application, they must discern conflicting value systems in the "texts" of their own environments.

To complete this unit of the 1920s, reading Faulkner introduces students to unresolved points of view which can affirm humanity without compromising standards and values. For all that we are made to dislike the vindictive Jason, primarily by listening to his hardened voice, we are shown how to accept him through the eyes of Dilsey. Here, then, is a narrative perspective which exploits neither compromise nor seduction, forcing the reader instead to encounter characters directly and to discover biases among the characters but only sympathy on the side of the narrative voice.

Next, pairing an African with an African American text permits the insights into colonization and domination, safely removed to Nigeria in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, to inform students' reading of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. Characters silenced by external or internal colonization cannot even compromise, for they have no rights to society. Completing these five novels with their vivid social portraits--the Jazz Age gone sour, the hardening effect of psychological wounds inflicted in World War I, the decay of Southern aristocracy, and African and African American cultures dominated by white power and misunderstanding--served to background the disorientation captured in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five. Each of these six novels contrasted in style and perspective.

The last two novels we read were straightforward narratives allowing access to the dynamics of other cultures. Although more modest in scope and thinner than his other works, Carlos Fuentes' The Good Conscience proved an ideal center for this course; in fact, its lesser critical reception illustrates the way the canon has followed the criteria of the dominant critical mode wherein density ranks higher than social significance. Fuentes' second novel was originally published in Spanish in 1959 as Las buenas conciencias. Daniel de Gauman notes that the plural form of the Spanish title "conveys more of Fuentes' intention" since

> Fuentes' thesis is that the individual cannot accomplish anything by isolated rebellion against the norms of his society, that sooner or later he will be obliged to conform, forced to accept the social hypocrisies that he originally rejected. If he does not, he will be himself ejected, or he will have to remove himself to another milieu where he will have the freedom to live his own life.

Appropriately, Fuentes cites in the frontpiece Kierkegaard's claim that "The Christian speaks with God, the bourgeois speaks of God." Thus, whereas Achebe's Okonkwo is destroyed within the village of the Ibo because he refuses to capitulate to the British, and Ellison's invisible man chooses to stay underground because he cannot establish an authentic identity within the dominant culture, Jaime Ceballos has not the strength to continue to speak authentically with God and thus abrogates at the end of the novel, becoming one of the bourgeoisie he has despised.

The most appealing part of the novel for college students is its description of Jaime's quest for an authentic identity in a hypocritical society--in Saul Maloff's words, "the sensitive adolescent discovering in his agony the awful gap between . . . dreams and reality" (20). Jaime's lineage is traced in the opening pages of the novel through his immigrant Spanish family who since coming to Mexico have flirted just enough with liberalism to survive successive revolutions and yet preserve their economic stability in an unstable Mexican society. As a citizen of conservative Guanajuato, Jaime is expected to become another "practiced, talented, certified hypocrite" (4). Criticized by Maloff as "excessively panoramic and expository"--even "a sketch for a large-scale novel of Mexican history and experience" (21), these passages nonetheless establish an artificiality appropriate to the novel's contempt for bourgeois Mexican society. Rather than promising an epic it cannot produce, this background through its very reductive nature effectively undermines the society it flattens into stereotypes; and in contrast to the telescoped view of the family sketched in the first two chapter, Jaime and his dilemma loom large. This prefacing of Jaime's anguish with a frivolous, condescending sketch of his family makes his compromise both inevitable and heartrending. The Voltairean tone de Guzman notes in the opening chapters is not so likely abandoned as Fuentes "gets engrossed in the presentation of his story" (101), as it is deliberately used by Fuentes to accomplish a purpose quite different from that of

Candide; for whereas Candide's impossible dream is mocked, Jaime's is mourned and eulogized.

Less subtle than Flannery O'Connor, who leaves her readers to infer the definition of goodness at stake in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Fuentes allows Jaime himself to grapple with the concept of goodness. Jaime has just turned eleven at the end of chapter two but already is asked to deny the leadings of his heart and personal religion to participate instead in the organized Church. His uncle's reasons for this advice turn solely on pragmatic motives. "Although Christian morality serves life," Balcárcel concedes, "an unbalanced excess has no purpose whatsoever except to set you apart from the rest of mankind, endangering social relations which I assure you are just as important as good moral habits" (33). Confused, the dutiful Jaime seeks to comply; but he cannot but recognize the way this policy distances one from God: "in his heart, he refuses to accept" these conclusions (34).

Like Alan Strang in Peter Shaffer's Equus, Jaime's adolescent longings and hypocritical family lead him to confuse his spiritual and his sexual passion. In the scene in which the call of his aunt/surrogate mother, Asunción, interrupts his discussion with the political activist, Ezequiel Zuno, whom he is helping to hide in the stable, Jaime collapses his longings into one passion:

> The things of the world would not escape him again, they were fixed now. He saw Christ very close, hanging

> upon nails. Ezequiel Zuno still closer, and not mute like the crucified figure. The Easter candle which was lit in order to be consumed. His own adolescent body, half-boy, half-man, the body he had discovered today, which joined them all, Christ, Ezequiel, and the candle. As he went up the stairs he touched his face, his shoulders, and his thighs. On the landing, the varnished colors of the Crucifixion opened like a fan. And above, at the head of the stairs, waited the impatient dark-clad woman. (55)

If Ezequiel is a mature example of a man committed to nonconforming ideals, Jaime's Indian friend Juan Manuel Lorenzo is a peer who models integrity. Lorenzo discusses books and ideas with Jaime and even leads Jaime to a meeting with his birth mother, whom Jaime's family rejects because she does not represent bourgeois values. However, as an Indian, Lorenzo is already an outsider and so need not agonize over a break with his social class--a break Jaime sees even more difficult as he views the pitiful world his mother inhabits. Much less can he at a mere seventeen follow the advice of Obregón, the reliable priest who advises him not to punish himself simply from a sense of guilt--for Jaime has indulged in excessive flagellation from disgust with himself and family. Rather, Obregón says, Jaime must learn to love others--for as the reader can see, a literal translation of Jaime (J'aime) declares "I love" to be his nature. By implication, Jaime must also learn to love himself.

Jaime's abrogation to the bureaucratic system he despises is thus seen not as a final loving acceptance of family, but rather as love's denial. To make this point clear, we are made to witness Jaime's act of violence against a loving cat--a violent act wherein Jaime symbolically crushes his capacity for love as he smashes the body of the cat whose "round silvery eyes" are "filled with terror and supplication" (143). Along with love Jaime kills the intuitive nature he shares with Lorenzo and adopts the cold, calculating, pragmatic logic of his uncle Balcárcel.

Ultimately, what undoes Jaime is the prospect of facing life alone, outside his heritage. Juan Manuel Lorenzo is but a boy like him, and one without power. "I haven't had the courage," he says at last; " . . . I was too weak to stay alone with my failure, I had to find some kind of support, and the only one I have is my aunt and uncle, the life they have prepared for me, the life I inherit" (147).

And so Jaime alters his definition of <u>good</u> to conform to bourgeois standards of success:

> He realized now that he would be a brilliant law student. He would pronounce official speeches. He would be the spoiled child of the Party of the Revolution in Guanajuato. He would receive his degree. The city's mighty would consider him a shining example. He would marry a rich girl and found a family. He would live with a good conscience.

A good conscience. . . . (148)

The novel ends with this quiet conformity to the pathway of success as Jaime sacrifices his conscience to Pharisaical righteousness. No alternative is provided for Jaime.

Even so, the last novel of the course--Nadine Gordimer's Six Feet of the Country--provided no solutions to the distress of Blacks and Coloureds coping under a system of color codes unrelieved by subsequent beginning reforms in South Africa. By this time in the course students had no problem identifying protests implicit within the text.

Expanding the canon internationally thus allows students for a semester to see various cultures through the eyes of both members and outsiders, of both proponents and opponents of wealth, stoicism, compassion, tolerance, and confusion. For a prime value of the international canon (as Annette Kolodny argues for the diversified American canon) is the way it defamiliarizes everyday experience and helps us see familiar worlds as if for the first time--worlds replete with the seductions of conformity and compromise. Through close, critical readings of these texts one seeks to make students better readers of all texts, be they written or living and moving around us.

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